

Going Home

A Novella

(Extract)

Karsten Krampitz

Reply

In the “Steinburg General News” of 7th March 2006 you write: “Before and after the death of Benno Wuttke there were many pharisees, but only one Judas – IM (Unofficial Agent) “Carnation” alias Ulrich Schwenke.”

- I hereby declare that at no point was I an Unofficial Agent of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR.

Steinburg, 14th March 2006

Stefan Eisenmann (lawyer) for Ulrich Schwenke, Pastor (ret.)

Flowers are dangerous. Did you know that? At first I didn't believe it; the verger told me about it, days after it happened.

“Pastor Schwenke,” he said, “every morning there's a sort of little bouquet lying there.” It was always in the same place; hardly three paces from the church steps, beside the phone box which was still there then. The burning petrol had left a circle behind on the paving, dark blue, which the men from the municipal street cleaning couldn't get rid off for a long time – like a scar in the basalt.

Usually it was carnations against which the police had to take action, as they had taken action that day. The comrades of the People's Police had been very quick to remove the sign that Brother Wuttke had placed on the car roof.

The business with the flowers died down in time, but never stopped completely. You know, sometimes there were even carnations lying there in the middle of the day. Well, what can one do? It's not forbidden to drop a flower as one's passing. And each time two gentlemen jumped out of the Lada, which had a permanent parking space there; one man to secure the corpus delicti and the other to back him up.

*

Today our church on the market square is seen more as a museum, a short stop for tourist parties on their way somewhere else. “Look! This is where IT happened!”

But the people who live here, they're not even superstitious any more. In this town the Almighty is a rumour; people have forgotten that they've forgotten God. God is not given.

God giveth.

But why am I telling you this? Print my lawyer's letter. And then, sir, you should leave it at that. Cui bono? The whole story has caused such mischief. Apart from which: Your article appeared long ago, we know your answers. You're not looking for the right question now, are you? That's how it is in journalism, is it?

You had half a page in the local section. Not bad. At the time we weren't even allowed to put in an obituary notice. - And not only that! The reporter subsequently even has the time and leisure to familiarise himself with the object of his supposed researches.

I already said to my wife: "The man has some nerve, turning up here." I mean, who on earth did he talk to before?! To other reporters? Always the same thing: On anniversaries each one copies what the other has written. Or like you, my friend, what's in some file or other. What do these files know about me as a human being? Who am I then? Really nothing more than the sum of everything registered in the files with respect to my person?

It's outrageous. We pulled the phone line out of the socket; the new number won't be in the telephone book. It was unbearable: All the strangers who think they can abuse you at any time of day or night. My wife was pestered when she went shopping – on account of me. But you know all that.

You know nothing.

I'm a Judas? Some expert you are.

Is he not the one to whom Jesus is supposed to have said: “That thou doest, do quickly.” Tell me, how does that work: to betray the hiding place of someone who is leading a public life? Someone, of whom all the world knows where he’s staying.

And what do you expect from me? Should *I* also defend my dignity with the noose?! Who are you? Who gives you the right to spread such things? You know nothing. You have nothing. No declaration of commitment with my signature.

And then all this kitsch. I ask you, if I just read this pathetic crap. I can quote it, can’t I? “Time heals all wounds...” You can forget that; time itself is the wound. An illness which I shall soon have put behind me. In a couple of weeks I’ll be seventy eight. Do you understand? I shall soon be going home, and another will question me there.

No, my friend, I will not justify myself to you.

Apart from which I am still subject to the pastor’s duty to remain silent, even in retirement. So I may not at all talk to you about everything and everyone. Do you find that amusing? A supposed informer, who appeals to the duty to remain silent. - And is that not a story?! Do you get something like a kill bonus on that sheet? I’m only asking. Your efforts and your courage, too, have to be rewarded! To pull the lion’s tail, when the lion’s dead, not everyone dares do that.

The lawyer told me, you’re originally from Kassel. I see. A forty year-old local news editor from Hesse? Well, sir, you’ve certainly come far. My wife said earlier: “Why on earth don’t *we* tell the people in Kassel, how *they* lived?” Yes, why not? I’d like to take a look at your file? Could I do that?

Oh, so this already is the interview? Are you already recording it?

What is that noise?! Lenchen! Barking like that again today. GOOD LORD! Lene, what on earth is the dog doing outside? LENCHEN, THE DOG!!! Please take a look, will you? Our dog is almost blind. Now he always barks when he's afraid. But what can one do? – I'll close the window. Just a moment.

*

If I could talk to him again? I would ask him: Brother Wuttke, have you not read in the Bible that suffering and affliction are part of life? That the witnesses bore with good cheer what was inflicted upon them? It is written of the Apostles, “and they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.” And the Apostle Paul says, “but we glory in tribulations.” In Hebrews is written: “For ye took joyfully the spoiling of your goods.” – Brother Wuttke, have you not read that? How in all the world could you then bring yourself to take such a step?

Is it unbearable for us to have a crucified man as Lord?! One who is defenceless and loving, who did not protest, who from the cross prayed for his executioners and tormenters, who said to us: “Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you!”

*

Look, even now I do not wish to speak badly of Benno Wuttke. But that really was characteristic of the man: He always found it hard to reconcile the categories of time and space. He not only never kept an appointment – one would also meet two or three others whom he had stood up at the same time, at the same place. Yet time was his proper profession. As pastor Brother Wuttke was one who, as we say, *received the call late*, and had been a watchmaker first. They often smiled about it at council: No, a watchmaker who has no sense of time at all? Who is always late, and is also out of place in these times. I can still see him standing there, in his

old suit and with a cold pipe in his right hand, brooding over some trivialities. Sometimes he would lapse into the wonderful singsong of his homeland. That East Prussian: “Merrrcy!” Or: “Whit’s the rrrush? If ye don’ come the day, ye’ll come the morrow, the day efter for sure...”

But at the same time he also radiated such disturbance... - how can I explain it? Once I got into Brother Wuttke’s car. I no longer remember where we wanted to drive to. So I wanted to fasten my seat belt, the man began to laugh at that, wanted to know, whether I didn’t believe in the “dear Lorrred” any more?

All right. Can I entrust myself to the Lord at all times and in all places? Or am I challenging Him with that? Does rush hour traffic not present a welcome opportunity for proof of the existence of God? – Better not take the chance. And he really did drive like a madman. Can I say that, “a madman”? There are one or two people, after all, who still think Benno Wuttke was a madman.

Was Jeremiah mad, when he smashed a pot and walked through the city with a yoke around his neck? Or Ezekiel, when he broke a hole in the wall of a house, instead of using the door? Or Jesus, as in the sight of all he consorted with shady riff-raff? – Who or what is mad? And what is normal?

At any rate Brother Wuttke did mad things. Once at Whitsun he let a dove fly around the church to make the Holy Ghost vivid. At another service he brought a telephone with him. Psalm 50, verse 15: “*And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee!*”

I also remember another sermon very well: “*Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*”- The whole time he held a little tomcat in his arms. The children, who

were sitting with their parents in church... their eyes shining, well. Brother Wuttke said that recently he had put the kitten on top of the stove, right at the top, and then he had called: "Jump little cat! Don't be afraid!" And truly, the little tomcat had jumped into his arms in one leap. He had repeated the experiment the same day with the mother of the little tomcat. "Not a thing. Didn't jump," said Brother Wuttke, "although it could've trusted me." But it doesn't matter. She still gets her food. The ideas the man had! For a funeral service he once had the smith give him a heavy iron chain, which he then threw to the floor during the sermon. That's how it will be, he said, one day, when we lose our chains.

*

He himself had already cast off his bonds long before. Brother Wuttke spoke about it now and then, no he went into raptures! Oh, he, too, had been a contrite sinner, a schnorrer and a vagrant and also a thief. But above all a boozier. But Jesus, our Lord, had come not least for them. And they to him – all those that labour and are heavily laden. Why he ended up in our town, Brother Wuttke couldn't say. I think Steinburg will simply have been on his way. At the time Benno Wuttke was completely finished. His first marriage and his watchmaker's business had failed – at the same time. And so he drifted through the country from east to west and back. The border with West Germany was still passable. Benno Wuttke was not far off drinking himself to death. It wasn't that he didn't want to accept help – there wasn't any. Once he had broken into a shop, it was during the week and in the middle of the day! He had climbed into the store through the cellar window, had grabbed two bottles of spirits and made such a noise – intentionally! – that the man at the cash desk came to see what was going on. The sales assistant should kindly call the police and put an end to the torment. But what did the man do? He even held the door open for him! He even winked at

Benno Wuttke! So no, ‘All right. I know what you need. Come on, get going!’ It wasn’t his shop, after all.

When Brother Wuttke told the story many years later, he still said: “Naw, ye’ve niver seen a boozer like me, I’m tellin’ ye.”

*

Benno Wuttke was on the tramp, as it were – but not as a watchmaker. Do watchmakers even go on the tramp? Can one go to a building site and ask: Good afternoon, do you have any watches that need repairing? It doesn’t matter anyway. The man was on the road, and in Steinburg he was hoping to “turn a good trick”, waiting outside churches and cemeteries until the people come out. You still see it. Or one pesters the minister at his front door: “God be with you and yours! An honest vagabond asks for a small favour.”

And one gets drunk on the money. But our Benno Wuttke was still relatively well “provided for” that day, not to say full up to the gills. In this state – in fact he was already on his way to leaving the town – he rang at the old brick building of the Community of Christ. Later he was told, that he had asked the verger with a slurred tongue, whether the ladies and gentlemen would allow him to shave himself. “Shave?” the verger had asked – Yes, otherwise he would look “like a down and out”.

Oh Lord, the poor! I don’t want to make fun of them: They after all are especially close to Him. But certainly Benno Wuttke was never *poor* in imagination, he was a play-actor, and a very talented one at that: Such a calamity, through no fault of his own. A human fate, of such dramatic dimensions, but a desperate shame too.

You can imagine the rest. Benno Wuttke would embellish his legends himself: He had had so much happiness. It had been as if the just had

asked the king: Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you to eat?
When were you thirsty, and we gave you to drink?

Nonsense, in the Community of Christ, they were all simply unbelievably kind people. The shave became a bed, a hot bath, a meal, a new coat, and shortly after that Benno Wuttke attended his first short service.

Today hardly anyone remembers the Community of Christ, at least not in our town. It was a Free Church, but not a big one. Their house stood a little way over from the motorway exit. At best twenty people came to service there on a Sunday; as a theology student I was there once or twice, out of curiosity. The original congregation was considerably larger, even if it was the break-away of a break-away. These people had split off from the traditional Pentecostal movement, their old Free Church, long before the war – that didn't happen here, however, but mostly in East Prussia. This small congregation at the edge of town was, therefore, if you like, a church in exile in miniature. Officially it never existed, that would have been the last straw: an expellees' church!

Be that as it may, Brother Wuttke, who had probably not set foot in a church since childhood, even in times of greatest need, even if it's said: Need teaches prayer – liked to transfigure his arrival at the Community of Christ, talked of an experience of awakening, as if on that day he had awoken from a long fevered sleep.

In fact, the people there first of all only got him to the hospital; that was days later, otherwise the man would have fallen into a delirium.

*

He got the most visits in hospital from Ellen, his later wife. It was her family who first took in Benno Wuttke. At the time Ellen was a cleaner in the hospital and so could also look after him a bit. She mended his

clothes, brought fruit, when there was any to buy, and altogether she liked to come and talk to him.

Benno Wuttke was always a good conversationalist, charming and eloquent. God, you should have heard him! The terrible thing is: Gradually I'm forgetting his voice. That's such a shame. There aren't many people left, whom one can talk to about it. Today so many claim to have known him – but none of them heard him. He touched one's soul with just a few words. It sounded like: 'Don't worry, I'll take care of it. It'll turn out all right.'

Ellen liked it when Benno Wuttke talked about the future and lost himself in some dreams. The old people in the Community of Christ were still forging plans for the past. You know how it goes: "Oh, d'you still remember. In the old days everything *will* be better!"

Apart from Ellen only elderly ladies and gentlemen belonged to the Community of Christ. Such old people, one wondered how they had managed to get across the Oder at all. There had been no baptisms for a long time, but every year more and more funerals.

And Ellen? She wanted to live. Live now.- But when is "now"?

But that's probably a weakness of Christianity altogether that it doesn't give one too much to laugh about. There's not much real joy about life in this world in the Bible. The idea of happiness doesn't turn up in the New Testament at all. Curious, isn't it? Yet people then were suffering from "withdrawal" for lack of happiness. For Ellen it was in the hospital, in a big eight-bed room, at the front, right by the door. Happiness could stand upright and without help again. It even wanted to go for a walk.

Happiness had shaved, washed and combed its hair and was actually not bad to look at. That at least is how Ellen once told it. Benno Wuttke had

rolled up the sleeves of his dressing gown. And Ellen couldn't help but smooth out the curly hairs on his lower arms.

Nevertheless Ellen had been far from enthusiastic: That evening when her father had said that this man, this stranger, would sleep in the small room for the time being she had been taken aback, even a little angry. How odd her parents had become. The two of them, father and mama, could hardly manage themselves; their little bit of pension was just enough for medicines on the black market, the rent and the firewood. It was Ellen who brought the money and most ration coupons home. It was Ellen who cooked and took care of the laundry. And now father came back from the parishioners' evening with someone *like that!* Someone who had wanted to shave in the church! – Just because one can't shave in the parish hall is no reason to bring the man home. Her parents were like children, who bring back some stray cat from their play, without knowing that these creatures are also a lot of work and effort. This stranger was a ne'er-do-well, someone who would just cause bother, who wasn't quite right in the head and probably had lice as well. And on top of that the sharp smell that came off him... And that's exactly how it came to pass: Already the next day because of him they had to call the doctor, who then just shook his head.

But now – after a week in hospital – he could be recognised as a human being. A strong fellow, so very different from the men in Steinburg, the old ones and the war-wounded or the adolescents with the big mouths who always shouted after her on the street. Benno Wuttke was his name. And the hands he had on him! So big, they didn't go with the trade he claimed to have learned at all. Or had he always repaired the clocks at the railway station or on church towers?

In the afternoon they now sat together on the bench outside, and Benno Wuttke told her about the world, clocks – and food. Oh, his greatest dream was just once in life to have a whole roast chicken, all to himself, which he didn't have to share with anyone. That would be real happiness, something he would remember all his days. And the way this Benno Wuttke talked, to Ellen it was as if someone had opened a window. It's impossible to explain; Ellen didn't understand it herself. This Wuttke hadn't said anything important at all. yet listening to him was like... - like breathing.

But I'm already telling too much.

At any rate, the next day Ellen brought him the roast chicken. So Benno Wuttke's prayers had been heard. Where had she got it from, he wanted to know. Entirely without ration coupons?! Oh that was a delight! The two of them sat outside on the bench again, away from the glances of strangers, and Benno Wuttke offered her a wing, but Ellen refused. Not at all, the roast was only for him. He should enjoy it.

*

The years in the Community of Christ left their mark on Benno Wuttke. The members of this Free Church felt themselves called to bear special "witness". I don't want to say any more about that. You should have experienced the old pastor just once! On Sundays the man didn't only lament the decline of morals and standards, he also railed against nicotine and the craving for sweet things – now those really were pressing problems. Well he couldn't be castigating Communism all the time, that would have caused trouble. Apart from that, Paul says, every soul is subject to higher powers, and the Romans were no worse than the Reds. They shouldn't have voted Brown before that.- What was left as theme for the service was everything that's evil in the world at least, the catastrophes, all the storms and not to forget: the erroneous belief on all

sides. These were all signs that *His* kingdom would soon be upon us, the reign of Lord Jesus Christ! To Him they wanted to bear witness.

But what really constituted this congregation, was its community, the way it held together. You know, people who need one another behave differently to each other, not the way we know and experience it today: Capitalism is freedom from one another; but Jesus is freedom *for one another*.

For sure, within the congregation there was also a certain severity. Benno Wuttke should have tried coming to church in a pair of jeans! “Merrrcy!” There would have been an uprising. In the Community of Christ they were just very concerned, that their righteousness was also expressed in the way they dressed – and of course in their conduct.

So Benno Wuttke was soon in regular work. As you know, time is money. And every time needs its clocks. In that sense Benno Wuttke, who was otherwise always unpunctual, had come just at the right time to set up as a watchmaker in Steinburg.

In time he even achieved a modest prosperity: On the side our Benno Wuttke in his workshop also conducted a quite flourishing trade in second hand goods of every kind – belts, pots and even scissors! In those years there had been no scissors to buy anywhere. What he had above all though were watches, second hand watches. Any number of them. You won’t guess where all those watches came from!

From time to time Russian officers came to his shop, ones who had been stationed in Germany since the end of the war. These Red Army men still had the things lying around. Watches had for a long while been a kind of currency to them. A means of payment, however, whose value was expiring. One can hardly imagine it today: These men had saved watches!

Master watchmaker Wuttke now helped them to exchange the old currency for the new. Word got around, so that Benno Wuttke had a very good reputation with the staff of the Steinburg garrison. And not a few of the officers expressed their gratitude with a bottle of vodka.- Vodka!!! Benno Wuttke, who was so terribly glad to have escaped the monster alcohol, not one more dram had he drunk; there was nothing else he could do but pass this present on to his customers. With a small surcharge to cover his expenses, it goes without saying.

Benno Wuttke didn't want to stand there empty-handed when he asked for the hand of his Ellen. Her parents, as far as I know, were altogether relieved at the question.

The wedding is supposed to have been a splendid celebration. It was the last marriage in the Steinburg Community of Christ. And there was a baptism, that of little Karl. I can still hear Brother Wuttke saying: "The stork done a fine job there." The bird already brought the child two weeks after the wedding! "A miracle, eh?"

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)